

# why do people get tattoos?

*As increasingly diverse groups of people get tattoos, popular perceptions are often out of synch with the individual meanings behind them.*

Who gets tattoos, and why? A self-described “24-year-old, insecure female who isn’t a perfect, thin, beautiful supermodel” writes in the *Body Modification* e-zine that her Pegasus tattoo has helped her overcome hatred of her body. “It is rearing up on its hind legs with its wings spread like it’s about to take off, much like the way I want to break free of my self-doubt and start loving me for me.” The same e-zine carries an account of an operations manager at a Borders Books and Café who says about hiring tattooed employees, “We look for it. It makes things more interesting and

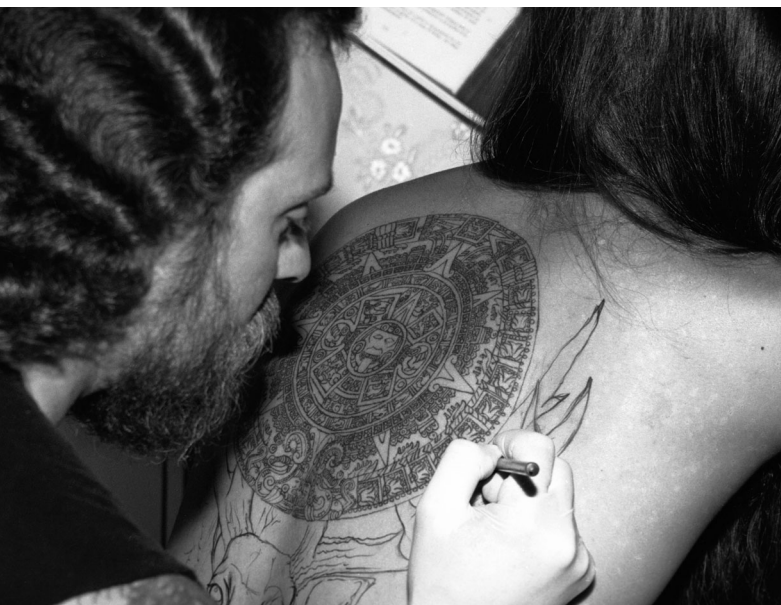


photo by Cathy Greenblatt

more fun.” While these individuals give varied and multi-layered meanings to their own and other’s tattoos, their personal assertions are sometimes at odds with the pervasive popular interpretations of tattoos as signs of rebellion or faddishness.

The growing number of enthusiasts exhibit a broad array of tattooing practices, from a discreet flower on the hip to full body and facial tattoos. According to a 2003 survey by Scripps Howard News Service and Ohio State

University, 15 percent of the U.S. adult population has tattoos, and the figure rises to 28 percent for adults younger than 25. In addition, 88 percent of those interviewed said they know at least one person who has a tattoo. According to *U.S. News and World Report*, tattooing was the sixth fastest-growing retail business in 1997. What accounts for the rising popularity and visibility of tattoos?

Most tattooed people see their tattoos as unique aspects of themselves, but sociologists who study tattooing focus on group patterns and overall trends. They examine the influence of media and consumer culture and the influence of gender, sexuality, race, and class on “body politics.” While no single explanation accounts for the increasing popularity of tattoos, researchers find that people use tattoos to express who they are, what they have lived through, and how they see themselves in relation to others and to their social worlds. Studies also find that people cannot fully control the meaning of their own tattooed bodies; the social contexts in which they live shape the responses to and interpretations of their tattoos by others.

Paul Sweetman writes, “The popular image of the tattooee as young, male and working-class is now increasingly outdated, as more and more men and women, of various age-groups and socio-economic backgrounds, choose to enter the tattoo studio.” In trying to understand these new tattooees, we focus on three groups—youth, women, and members of tattoo subcultures. We then discuss whether tattoos actually satisfy the aims of those who get them.

## tattooed youth

Tattooing is especially popular among teenagers and college students. At a stage when young people are seeking to assert their independence, tattoos may provide a way to ground a sense of self in a seemingly changing and insecure world.

Myrna Armstrong and her collaborators have examined

the prevalence of tattooing (as well as body piercing) among today's teenagers. Through the results of two surveys, one based on 642 high school students in Texas and one based on a national sample of 1,762 students, they conclude that most tattooed adolescents, contrary to stereotypes, are high-achieving students and rarely report gang affiliations.

Since the 1980s, tattooing has won a following among teenagers and college students, who have altered the reputation of tattooed people from that of criminals and laborers to that of artists and free thinkers. Whereas many cities, including New York, once banned tattoo parlors, they have become ubiquitous in most college towns. Numerous Hollywood celebrities, musicians, and models have visible tattoos, including Angelina Jolie, Lucy Liu, Janet Jackson, Johnny Depp, and Nick Carter —inspiring many youth to emulate their pop idols by becoming tattooed. This has resulted in what Michael Atkinson calls the “supermarket era” of tattooing, marked by easy availability and consumer choice.

Despite this aura of mass consumption, Atkinson finds that tattoos and the tattooing experience give young people feelings of greater control and authority over their own lives. Christine, for example, explains her tattoos as an effort to reclaim her body from the pressures of school, peers, and parents. “I want everyone to know that I’m sick of being told what to do and how to look.” Tattoos can become a symbolic battleground between adolescents asserting autonomy over their own bodies and authority figures trying to enforce standard codes of appearance.

Adolescents may also use tattoos as a way to signify and solidify group memberships as they move between schools and communities. Susan’s tattoo enforces her ties to childhood friends. “We grew up in [town] together, and these flowers [pointing to tattoo] were painted all over the gym in our elementary school.... I love knowing my girls and I will always be together like that.” Another young woman, Renee, describes to Atkinson how several women from her residence hall floor decided together to get tattoos of their university logo. While these individuals believe that tattoos can provide some semblance of belonging and security in a changing world, these promises of permanence often fall short in the face of real personal transitions and shifting social norms.

Eve, a young woman interviewed for this article,

explains that she and her fiancé plan to get tattoos on the day they sign their marriage license. The tattoo “symbolizes permanence, something long lasting but also a journey.” She argues that these tattoos are not about teenage rebellion, but about commemorating a passage to adulthood and a committed relationship. In an age when the divorce rate hovers around 50 percent, the tattoo emerges



photo by Cathy Greenblatt

as a poignant if shaky symbol of an attempt to sustain a long-term relationship. Eve emphasizes that even if she eventually divorces, she still wants a memento of her marriage because it marks an important era in her life.

As these young people illustrate, tattoos are a powerful means by which a generation can assert independence and commemorate important events, ranging from going away to college to living alone for the first time to getting married. In marking these rites of passage, young people give tattoos multiple and at times contradictory meanings. While some invoke tattoos as rebellion or rejection of authority figures and mainstream values, others utilize them in more nuanced ways to assert their own definitions of maturity and autonomy. Whatever the particular statements that young people are making with their tattoos, the act of getting a tattoo increasingly serves as a vehicle to mark adulthood.

## tattooing women

Women’s interest in tattooing has also been increasing in the United States since the 1960s. Today almost half of tattooed people are women, according to various sources. A 2003 Harris poll found that 15 percent of women and

---

*Miliann Kang teaches women’s studies, sociology, and Asian American Studies at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Katherine Jones is a graduate student in sociology at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.*

16 percent of men have tattoos. (The same poll found that 31 percent of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals had at least one tattoo.)

Tattooing offers many women control over their own bodies. Some have used the tattoo to challenge the limited roles of wife and mother and to explore other ways to define themselves. Around the turn of the last century, aristocratic women in England, France, and the United States, including Winston Churchill's mother and members of the Vanderbilt family, sported tattoos. Margo DeMello asserts that many Victorian women were drawn to tattoos as a way of demonstrating that they were "less likely to accept the idea of the quiet, pale, and bounded female body." In addition, she says, "tattoos have long been a sign of that resistance within the working class."

Perceptions of tattooed women as sexually promiscuous and lower-class have a long history. Albert Parry



photo by Cathy Greenblatt

describes a rape case in late-1920s Boston in which the prosecutor, upon realizing that the young woman he was defending had a tattoo, requested that the case be dropped. The judge and jury released the two men who raped her on the grounds that they had been misled by the butterfly on her leg. As with many women in rape cases, the defendant herself was put on trial, and her tattoo was seen as evidence of her guilt, overriding whatever meaning she herself hoped to assert through it.

While men and women both get tattoos, men are more likely to use tattoos to reinforce traditional notions of masculinity, whereas women often both defy and reproduce conventional standards of femininity. In interviews with Atkinson, Caroline states, "Women nowadays believe that

whatever men can do women can do better, and that includes tattooing." Zeta explains that tattoos provide a concrete way of challenging traditional gender norms: "I could talk and talk and talk about wearing grungy clothes and not dyeing my hair to look like a Barbie doll, and no one would care since all of that is superficial." While Zeta believes the permanence of a tattoo demonstrates a deep and tangible commitment to alternative gender definitions, other women use tattoos to conform to mainstream standards of femininity.

As tattoos become more common, they are less able to express subversive definitions of women and their bodies. Atkinson argues that many of the young women he interviewed used their tattoos to enforce rather than challenge traditional femininity. Their tattoos were placed in either easily hidden or sexualized areas of the body such as the shoulder, hip, or lower back. The images were also traditionally feminine, such as animals, flowers, and hearts. Stephanie Farinelli, a regular participant in tattoo contests, describes to Mifflin how mainstream expectations for feminine beauty shape these competitions: "I felt that I was not feminine-looking enough and scantily clad enough to win. I got a wardrobe change, went on a diet, and won first place the following year." DeMello argues that while feminist scholars have rushed to embrace tattooing's liberatory potential for women, "People aren't interested in the women who get men's names on them, or who get what their men want on them because it's sexy and feminine rather than 'empowering.'"

Even when women seek freedom and power over their own bodies, the meanings women attach to their tattoos are "culturally written over" by the larger society. Braunberger gives the example of Elaine Schieve, a North Dakota lawyer who got a tattoo of a Nile River goddess on her right ankle to celebrate her 60th birthday and the "liberation of menopause"—only to be confronted by friends concerned about the reactions of her husband and male colleagues who do not take women seriously in the law profession. Even among well-meaning friends, her intention of celebrating a personal passage was overshadowed by the social contexts in which women must struggle to achieve professional respect.

Women have pioneered the use of tattoos to reclaim their bodies from traumatic experiences, including disease and abuse. Recently, women recovering from breast cancer have sought tattoos, both to create a new aesthetic for mastectomy scars and to express the devastating effects of the disease. Tattoo artist Sasha Merritt, recognizing the importance of tattooing in the healing process for women who have mastectomy scars, advertises a special rate for breast cancer survivors at the Women's Cancer Resource



Center in Oakland, California. Andree Connors, a California writer with a rose tattoo over her mastectomy scar, told *Ms. Magazine* in 1992, "This is an invisible epidemic: everyone looks 'normal' because they're wearing prostheses. So the message does not get across to the world that we are being killed off by breast cancer."

Marking their bodies with tattoos helps women to feel they are reclaiming lost or violated parts of themselves—an especially important process for women healing from abuse or trauma. In an interview with Atkinson, Marion describes her participation in a sexual abuse survivor's group in which ten of the women had gotten tattoos: "Each of us has taken a turn writing a story about our tattoo and what it means. We present them at group meetings and go over how tattooing helps women feel in control of our bodies."

Women may use tattooing to reclaim their bodies not only from violence or illness, but from more everyday experiences of feeling unattractive, weak, or different—like the young woman with the Pegasus tattoo. While some critics regard tattooing as another form of self-mutilation, and this indeed may be true in some cases, the self-described experiences of most tattooees seem to contradict this interpretation. Whereas most people who engage in cutting are ashamed of and attempt to hide their scars, most tattooees regard their tattoos as sources of pride and works of art, even those who hesitate to display them in public.

For many women, tattooing is a complex practice that involves both conformity and resistance to the expectation that their bodies be attractive to men. While historically many women have sought tattoos as a way to transgress gender norms, contemporary women increasingly seek tattoos as conventional markers of feminine beauty. In both cases, women have used tattoos as vehicles to create a sense of community with other women around shared experiences, even including abuse or disease.

## tattoo subcultures

Some of those who modify their bodies in extreme ways by becoming heavily tattooed define themselves as neo- or modern primitives and identify with tribal tattooing practices. Neo-primitives define their movement in opposition to modern society and view body modification as a way of reconnecting to primal experiences. While the

tattoos worn by neo-primitives may be similar to those worn by others, many neo-primitives embrace tattoos and body modification as a spiritual experience and seek out modern primitive tattoo artists who take a ritualistic approach. Jamie Summers, a tattoo artist chronicled by Mifflin, sees tattooing as a "metamorphic rite." Some neo-primitive tattoo artists arrange ceremonies to coincide with phases of the moon or include chanting, drumming, and burning of sage in their sessions. For many neo-primitives, the tattoo not only becomes a primary source of identity but also shapes a sense of group membership. Thus, rather than being antisocial, Victoria Pitts states that heavily tattooed people form bonds with others in the body modification subculture. The shared practice of using tattooing to "provoke disdain, accept risk and push the envelope of body aesthetics" creates strong group ties.

Statistics on modern primitives are hard to find because the category is hard to define. Many modern primitives may also be members of other subcultures such as gay and lesbian, S and M, and fetish communities. While some tattoo artists may incorporate elements of modern primitive ceremony into their practices, they might not identify with the modern primitive movement. Also, the modern primitive practice of deeply personal and heavily symbolic tattooing has been taken up by people outside this community.

Some individuals may not identify themselves as modern primitives yet still consider themselves part of a tattoo community.

Often referred to as "tattoo enthusiasts," they not only have lots of tattoos but also share a commitment to associating with others who have tattoos and to a lifestyle in which tattoos are central. According to DeMello, activities such as reading tattoo publications, attending tattoo conventions, and participating in Internet chat rooms give members of a tattoo subculture a "sense that they have found people who are like them and who are not like everyone else."

This sense of shared values is especially true for those who use tattooing to criticize the consumer values of capitalist society. Cliff, a self-proclaimed neo-primitive interviewed by Atkinson, regards his tattoos as challenging the spiritual emptiness of our culture. "I was tired of looking like everyone else, and walking around like a zombie in my own body. Ripping up your body with tattoos is a way of getting in touch with yourself and others who are tired of being spiritually beaten down by our culture."

---

**Ironically, while some individuals invoke tattooing as a critique of consumer society, tattoos have themselves become a popular commodity.**

---

Ironically, while some individuals invoke tattooing as a critique of consumer society, tattoos have themselves become a popular commodity. As tattoos become more mainstream, some modern primitives engage in increasingly extreme practices to differentiate themselves. "When it [tattooing] gets embraced by the culture-at-large, somehow they take the rough edges off and make it palatable—cute-ify it and render it safe," says Don Ed Hardy in *Modern Primitives*. Tattoo artist Greg Kulz adds, "People are going for the extreme experience—whatever's accepted becomes boring, so you have to have something new."

While tattoo enthusiasts argue that tattoos are an expression of freedom and control over the body, their tattooing practices are highly sensitive to shifting social trends. And while many hard-core and neo-primitive people are regarded as marginalized and even freakish by mainstream society, they are part of established groups with their own codes of belief and norms of behavior.

## limitations

The message that a person intends to communicate through a tattoo is not always the message received by



others. The complex motivations of people who get tattoos are filtered through historical and cultural lenses that often impose unintended and unwanted meanings on their tattooed bodies. A person's choice of imagery, location of the tattoo, and whether or not to cover it are all influenced by that person's social context.

Despite their increasing popularity, tattoos still carry

stigma and can provoke discrimination. The University of California at Los Angeles conducted a "Business Attire Survey" in 1999 which revealed that 90 percent of campus recruiters looked negatively on tattoos. Despite evidence to the contrary, teenagers with tattoos are more likely to be perceived as gang members, drug users, dropouts, and troublemakers. A study by Armstrong and McConnell shows that medical professionals still often attribute tattoos to gang affiliation. Racial and ethnic minorities are especially likely to have their tattoos perceived as marks of gang membership or criminal behavior. Defense attorneys often advise their clients that visible tattoos can have a negative influence on middle-class (and white) jurors and judges.

Young people may find it necessary to cover their tattoos not only when looking for work but also on the job. Once employed, many people still need to keep their tattoos covered or face situations like that of a receptionist in San Diego interviewed by Mifflin: "People think I'm stupid until they talk to me. They think because you look different you have no respect for society and that you're not educated." Thus, while they may desire the tattoo as a mark of individuality, rebellion, or creative expression, some tattooees have difficulty reconciling their own intentions with negative social perceptions of their tattoos. Furthermore, hardcore forms of tattooing—such as full-body and facial tattoos—result in stronger stigmatization that can affect employability and social acceptability in ways that a small, easily hidden tattoo would not.

Tattoos also can create tensions in interpersonal relations. In Atkinson's study, Adele reveals, "I go home at night and cry sometimes because I don't have the brass to stand up and ask people to accept me for how I look" with a tattoo. Rena agonized over getting a tattoo when she noticed her father's reaction to a tattooed friend: "My dad won't even talk to her anymore when she comes by the house." In the end, she decided to place her tattoo where no one, especially her family, could see it. Even when a tattoo symbolizes positive relationships or accomplishments to the bearer, friends and family may still interpret it negatively.

Contradictory interpretations of tattoos may also confront those who wish to make political or social statements. Doug explains to Atkinson that his swastika tattoos were his way to reclaim the ancient symbol from its connections with Nazism. But he covers them because he is afraid they will be misunderstood, marking him as a white supremacist. The historical symbolism and common cultural understanding attached to this design overshadow Doug's intended message.

In addition, tattoos in and of themselves do little to

change social conditions and may contribute to the very conditions they seek to challenge. The anti-consumer values expressed by many neo-primitives and tattoo enthusiasts are undermined by the marketing of tattoos as fashionable and chic. Pitts reports that attempts to use tattoos to counter demeaning and objectifying images of women have been subverted by the popularization of tattooed bodies in pornographic magazines, videos, and strip shows.

The tattoo speaks to the ongoing, complex need for humans to express themselves through the appearance of their bodies. The tattooed body serves as a canvas to record the struggles between conformity and resistance, power and victimization, individualism and group membership. These struggles motivate both radical and mundane forms of tattooing. The popularity of tattoos attests to their power as vehicles for self-expression, commemoration, community building, and social commentary. At the same time, the tattoo's messages are limited by misinterpretation and the stigma that still attaches to tattooed people.

### recommended resources

Michael Atkinson. *Tattooed: The Sociogenesis of a Body Art* (Toronto University Press, 2003). Analyzes the continuing social significance of body art by examining how tattoo

enthusiasts deal with the stigma, choose how to display their tattoos, and construct group membership through tattoos.

Christine Braunberger. "Revolt Bodies: The Monster Beauty of Tattooed Women." *NWSA Journal* 12 (2000): 1–23. An historical overview of tattooed women, showing how they have challenged and redefined women's social roles and the norms of feminine beauty.

Margo DeMello. *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community* (Duke University Press, 2000). Examines the meaning of tattoos for various groups, including bikers, gangs, baby boomers, and members of Generation X.

Mary Kosut. "Tattoo Narratives: The Intersection of the Body, Self-Identity and Society." *Visual Sociology* 15 (2000): 79–100. Discusses tattooing as a form of visual communication that speaks not only to the identity of the wearer but to the surrounding culture.

Margot Mifflin. *Bodies of Subversion: A Secret History of Women and Tattoos*. 2nd ed. (PowerHouse Books, 2001). Presents the history of women's tattoo art, including discussions of how women have used tattoos at different time periods as well as interviews with female tattoo artists and enthusiasts.

---

winning photo contest entry by michael kimmel



Osaka, 1996